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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 003408

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SUBJECT: CODEL DORGAN DISCUSSES REGION WITH JORDAN,S FM

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Foreign Minister Salah Al Bashir discussed the strength of the U.S.-Jordanian relationship and the importance of resolving the Israel-Palestinian issue, as well as Jordan's support for Iraq and Lebanon, with Senators Dorgan, Conrad, Cochran and Whitehouse. He also spoke of the need to counter Iran's influence in the region by strengthening moderates. Bashir told CODEL Dorgan that the global economic downturn could adversely affect tourism and foreign investment in Jordan, and he speculated that many skilled Jordanians may return from the Gulf as the economy weakens there. End Summary.

The Core Issue

¶2. (C) In the December 14 meeting, Foreign Minister Bashir defined the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians as the core regional issue. He worried that Israeli election rhetoric and the divisions between the Palestinians would preclude an environment conducive for negotiations before mid ¶2009. He said that the United States is both "judge and catalyst" of the process so it is important that the next administration addresses the conflict quickly. Bashir stated that the positive aspects of 2008 were security improvements in the West Bank and an engaged international community. He asserted that the two-state solution is the only solution and that all other proposals are "distractions," referring to frequent press reports of a "Jordan option" that would see the West Bank absorbed into Jordan. Senator Dorgan responded that President-Elect Obama supports a two-state solution and has indicated that he will "hit the ground running."

Concerned Neighbor

¶3. (C) On Iraq, Bashir said that Jordan is a concerned neighbor and "can't afford a divided, weak Iraq." He said Iraq had seen progress but needed to reinforce recent security and political successes. He called the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) a "step in the right direction" but cautioned that any vacuum would bring "chaos."

¶4. (C) Bashir noted that Lebanese President Michel Sleiman had been received by King Abdullah earlier in the day and that Jordan supports him and Lebanon's constitutional government. He said that he did not foresee major changes from the Lebanese elections scheduled for May 2009 and that he hoped election tactics would not lead to setbacks. He said there were signs of improved cooperation from Syria and praised its arrest there of militants responsible for recent attacks in Tripoli.

Moderates Need Support

¶5. (C) Bashir said that moderates in the region need to be strengthened in order to effectively compete for popular support with extremists such as Hizballah or Hamas. He said,

however, that moderates such as the Government of Jordan (GOI) and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas were undermined by Israel's willingness to release prisoners to Hizballah and to Hamas. On the other hand, Abbas had only been able to secure the release of a few prisoners after four years in power, and Jordan was given custody of four prisoners last year only on the condition of holding them in prison for another 20 months. He also cited Israel's actions on the Mughrabi Gate issue despite Jordanian protests to halt activity near the Harem-al-Sharif complex. Moderates need to be seen to deliver, he said. Iran's influence is based on the fact that they are seen to deliver while moderates are not, he said, and regional challenges are exacerbated by this view. He worried about Iranian hegemony and said that others in the region such as Bahrain shared his concern.

Jordan and the World Economy

¶6. (C) Responding to a question about the effects of the economic crisis on Jordan, Bashir said he expected to see a slowdown in the tourism sector and foreign investment and that many expatriates would return from the Gulf as the economies there shrink. He characterized the return of the expatriates as a "mixed bag," since Jordan would lose the remittances on which much of its economy depends but would likely benefit from the influx of highly-skilled labor. Bashir said that people were pleased about the falling commodity prices but that wealth is disappearing and Gulf countries' budgets were based on projected oil prices of \$40-50 dollars per barrel.

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¶7. (U) CODEL Dorgan was comprised of Senators Byron Dorgan (D-ND); Kent Conrad (D-ND); Thad Cochran (R-MS); and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI). They were accompanied by the Ambassador and Poloff (notetaker).

¶8. (U) CODEL Dorgan did not clear this message.

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